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Cheung

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(54) **FLAT PANEL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM**

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H04R 7/10 (2006.01)

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USPC 381/152, 424, 431

See application file for complete search history.

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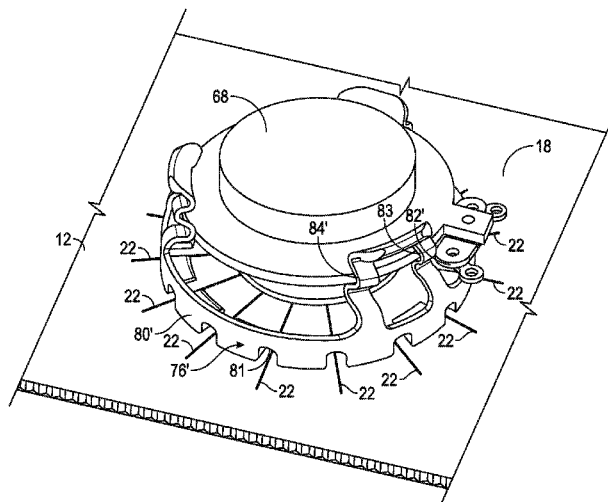
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(57)

ABSTRACT

A flat panel loudspeaker system may include a panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core, the panel having a weakened area defined by at least one slot formed through the outer sheet, and an exciter that is detachable for replacement purposes, is attached to the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

22 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



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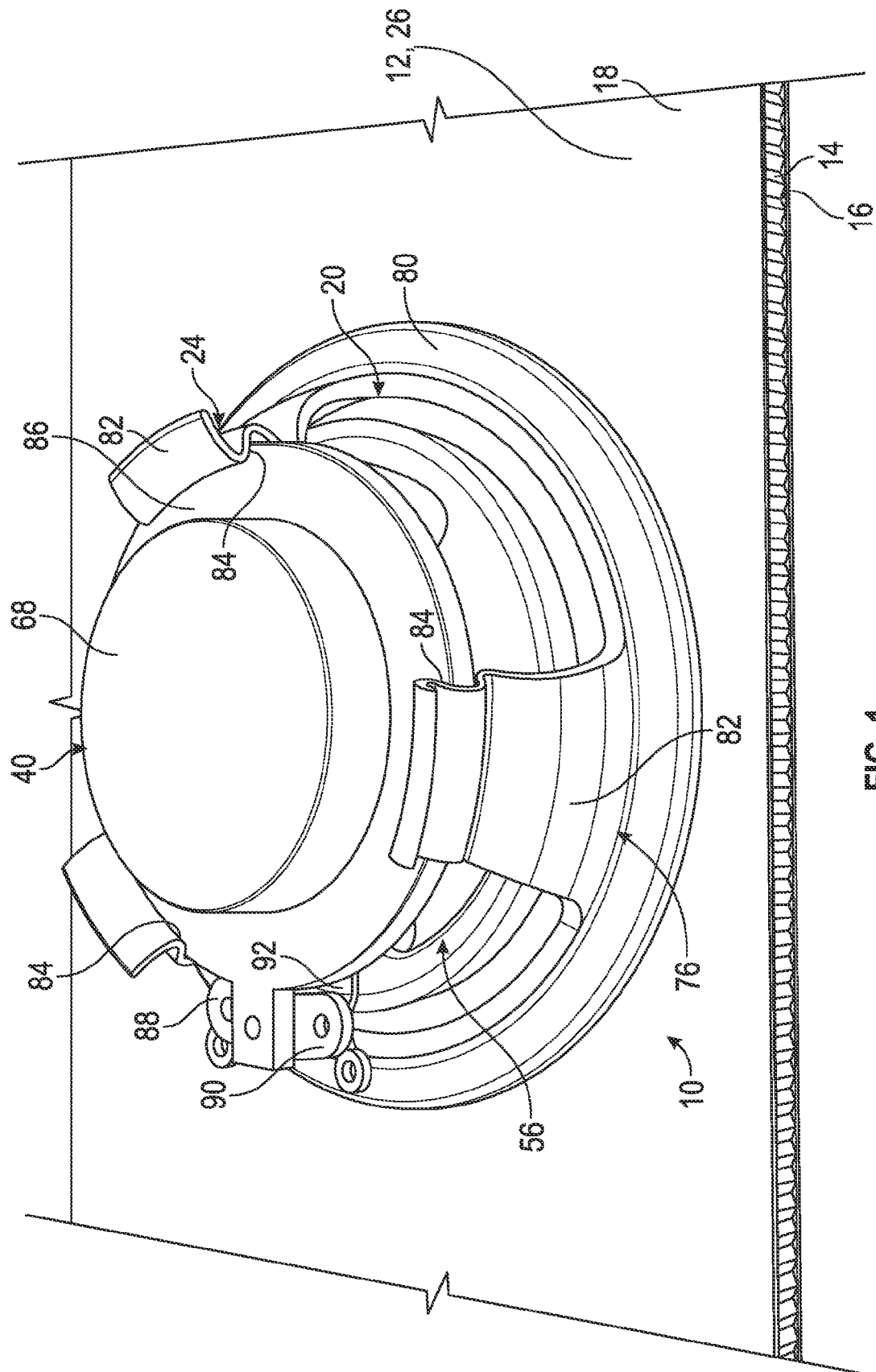


FIG. 1

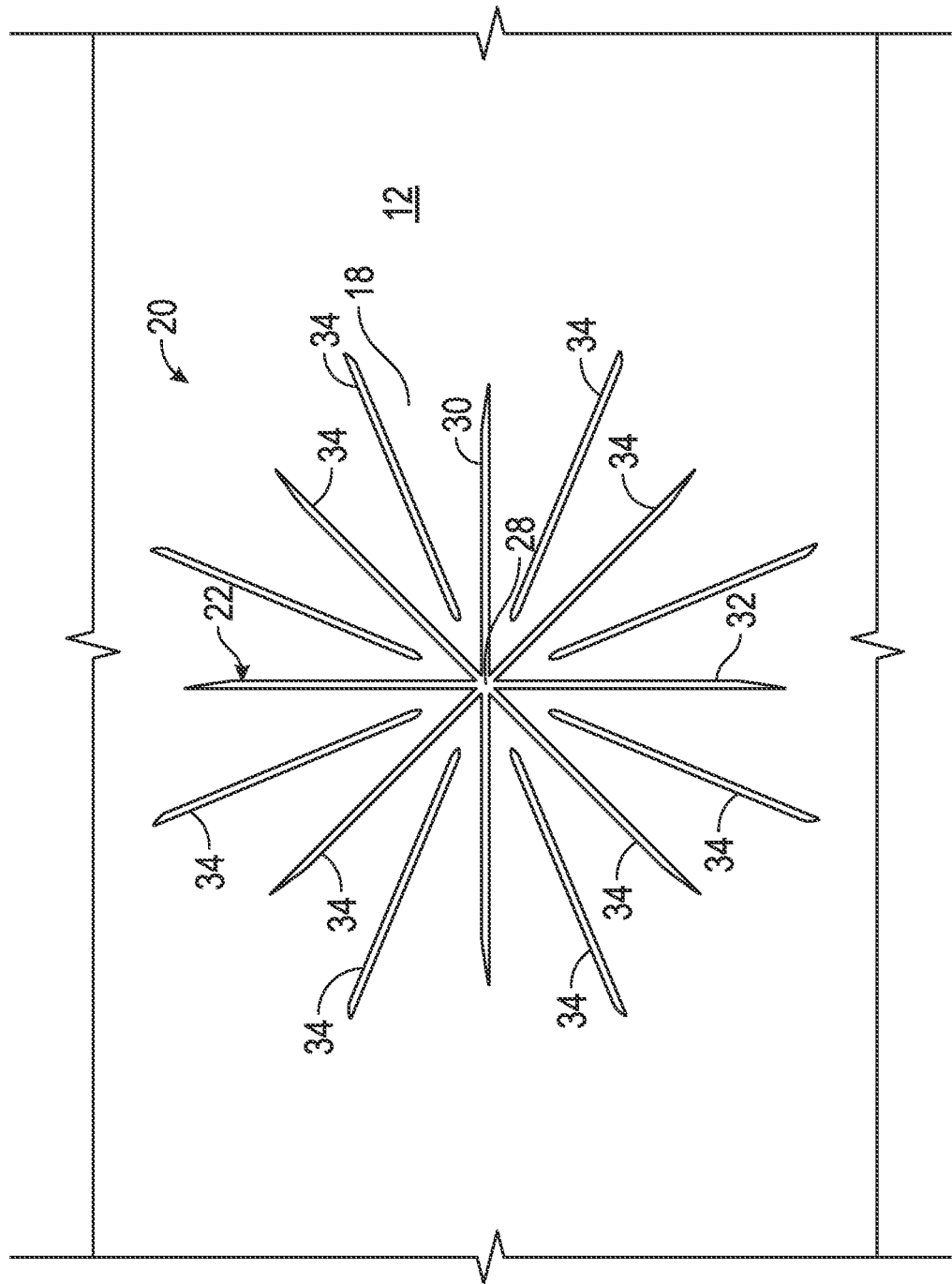


FIG. 2

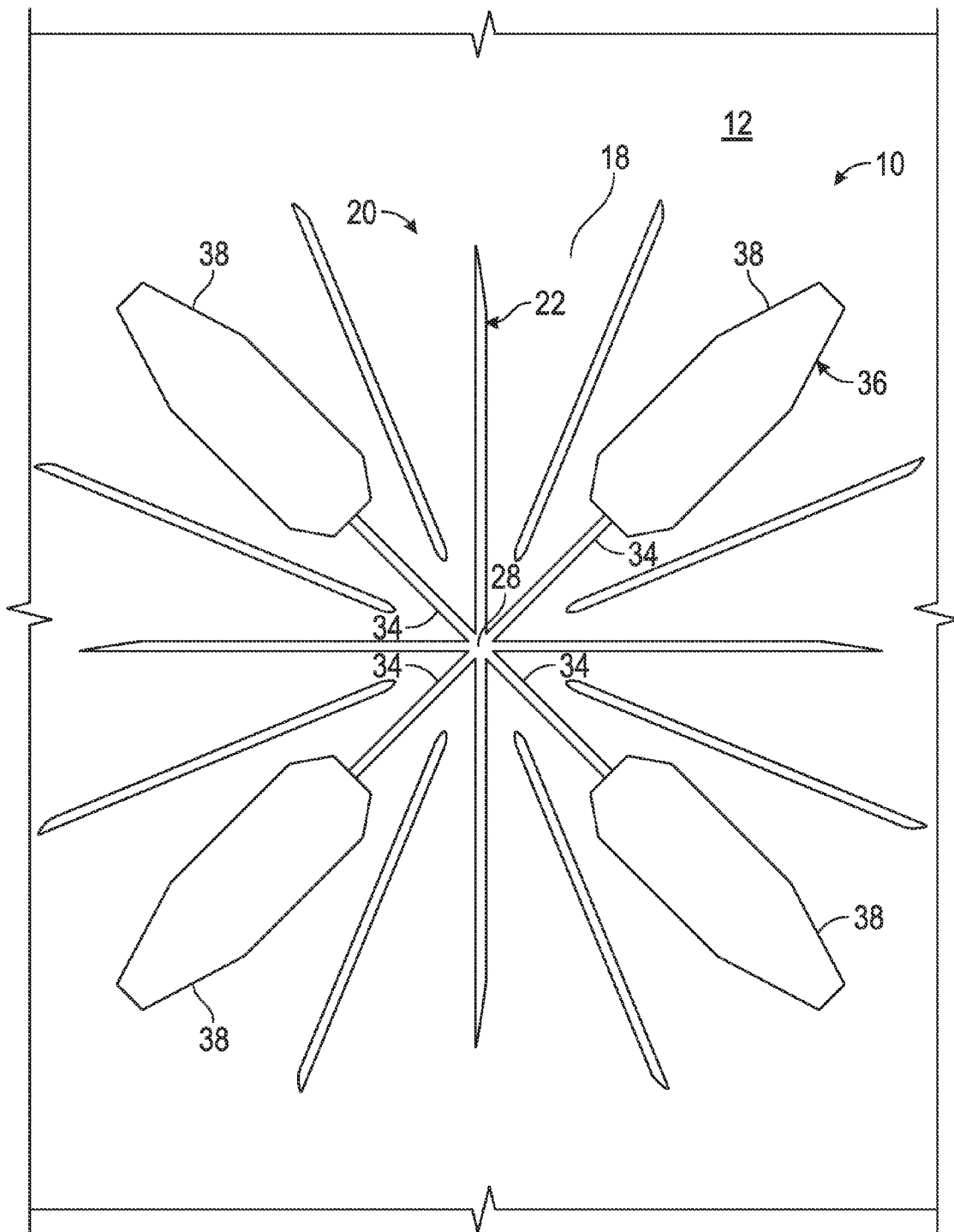


FIG. 3

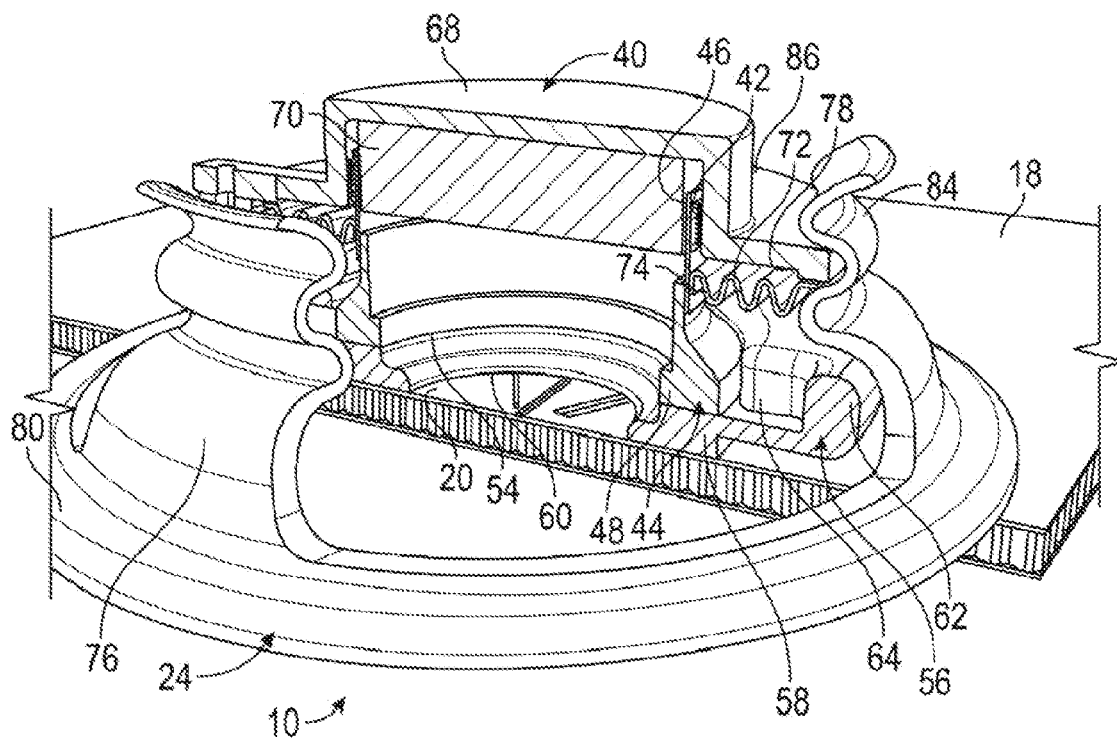


FIG. 4

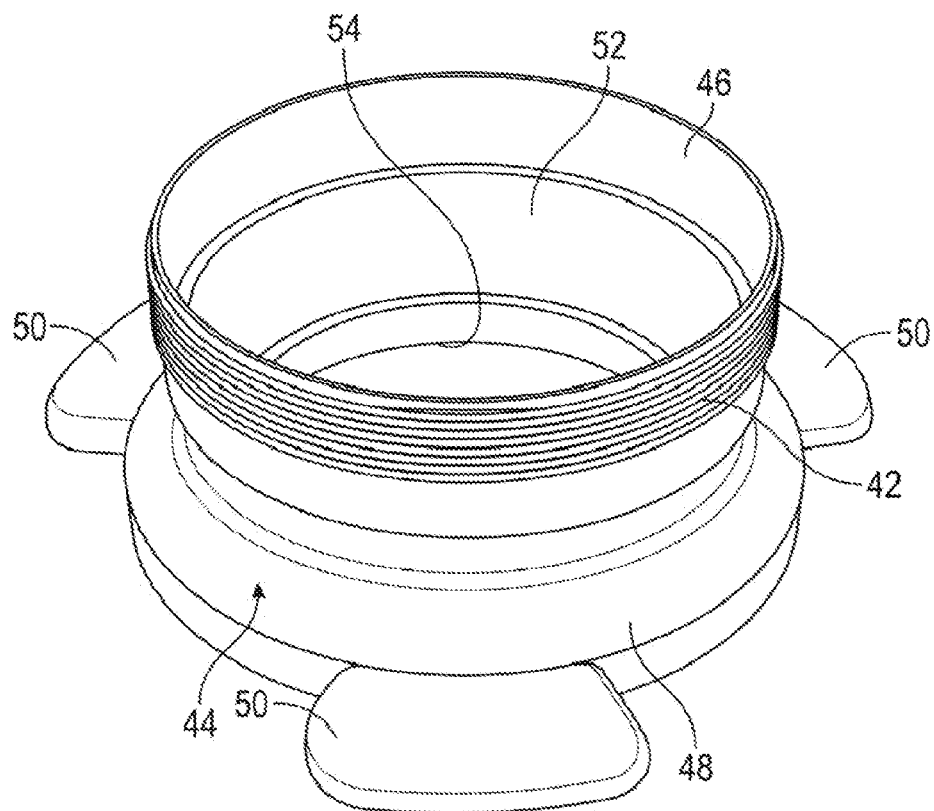


FIG. 5

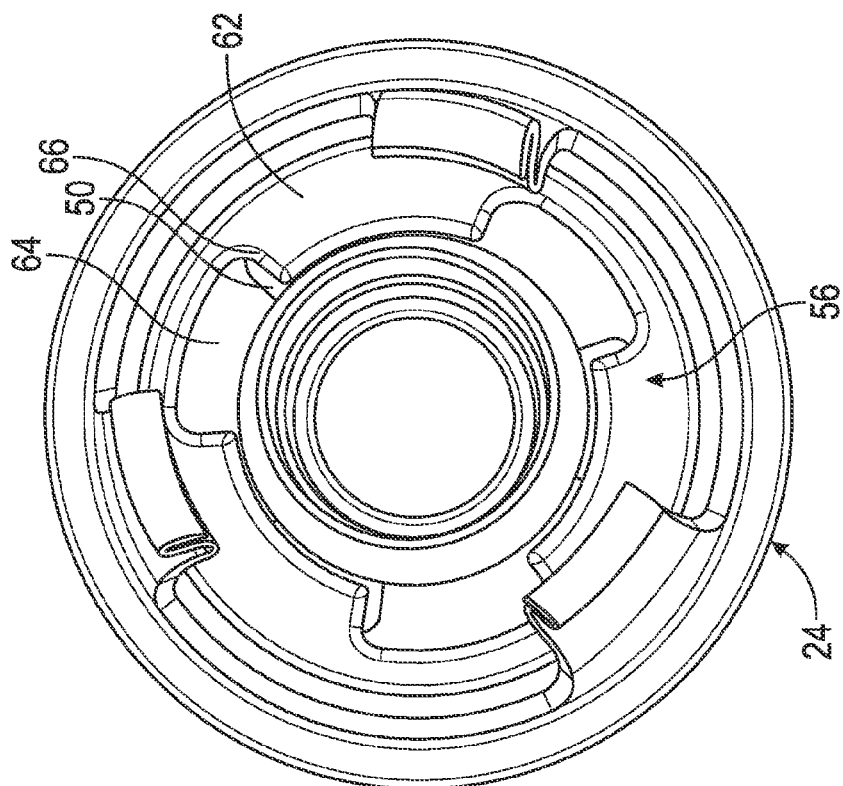


FIG. 6B

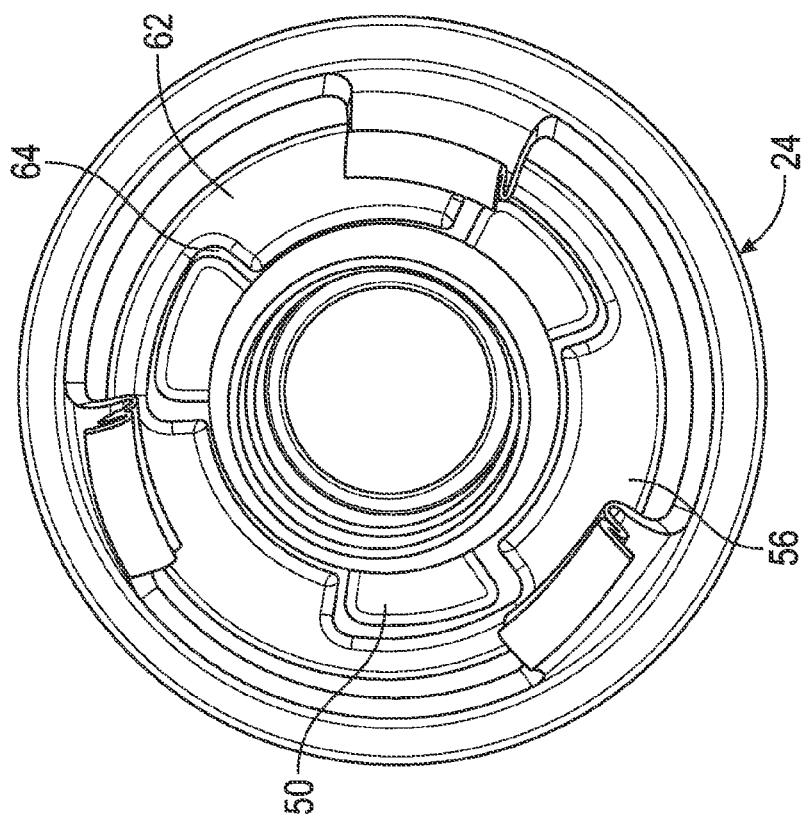


FIG. 6A

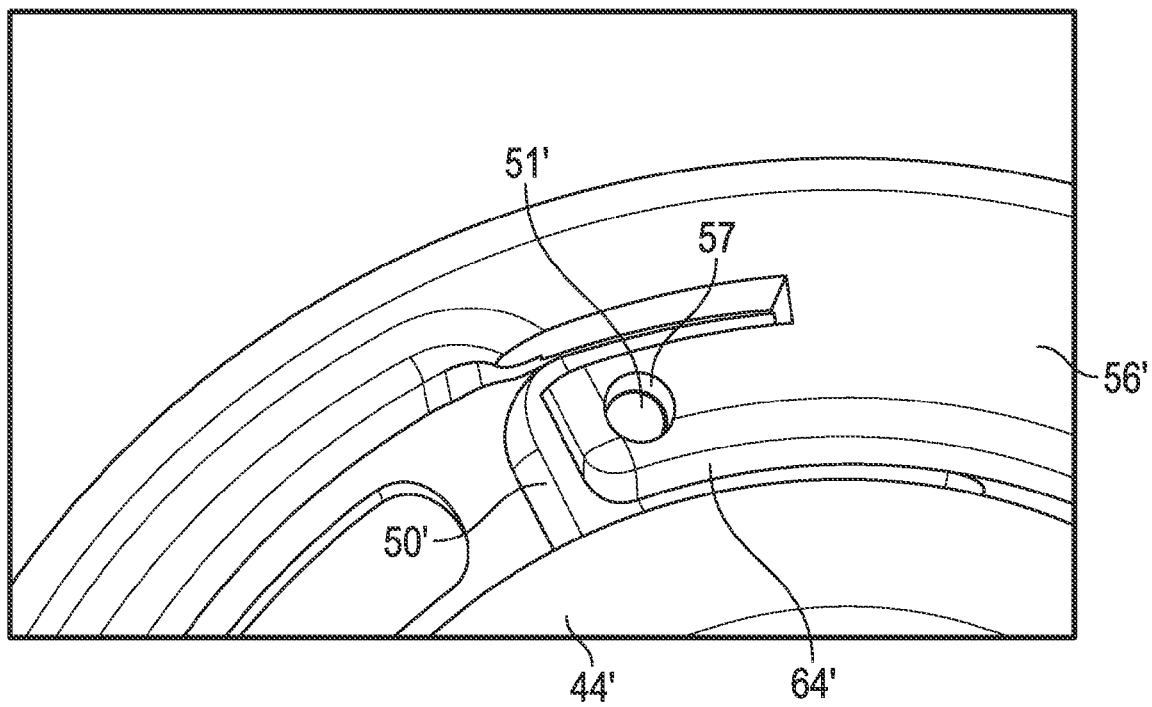


FIG. 6C

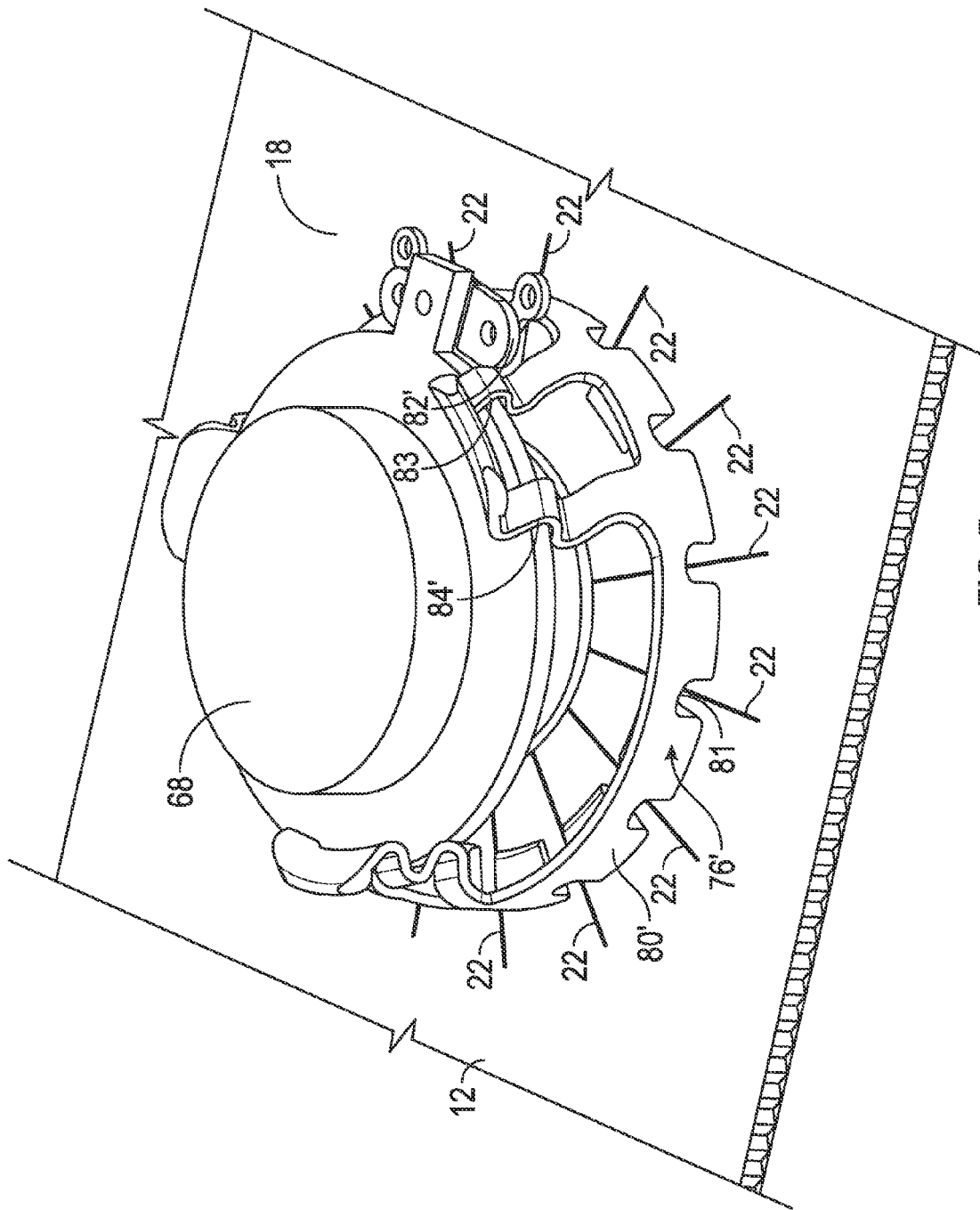


FIG. 7

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FLAT PANEL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

FIELD

The disclosure relates to a loudspeaker system, and more particularly, to loudspeaker systems mounted in wall panels.

BACKGROUND

Vehicles, such as aircraft, include passenger cabins and other compartments enclosed at least partially by lightweight panels. It is necessary for the pilot of such vehicles to communicate with the passengers in the passenger cabin of such vehicles, and therefore such cabins require speaker systems to transmit the pilot's voice, as well as other informational messages, music, motion picture soundtracks and the like.

Traditionally, cone speakers are used as part of a loudspeaker system. Such cone speakers include a driver having a cone driven by a voice coil. Such cone speakers typically are mounted above a ceiling panel over passenger seats in a vehicle. A disadvantage with such cone speakers is that the cone component takes up valuable space above the ceiling panel. Another disadvantage is that it is necessary to cut a hole through the ceiling panel to allow the sound energy generated by the cone to pass through the ceiling panel. In addition, cone speakers project sound at a relatively narrow dispersion angle (± 30 degrees). Therefore, for short distance sound projection, such as in an aircraft or other vehicle cabin environment, many cone speakers must be used, and spaced to cover the entire passenger cabin area.

The disadvantages of cone speakers with respect to space, narrow sound projection, and the necessity of cutting a hole through the panel may be overcome by using a flat panel speaker. Currently, there are two types of flat panel speakers: electrostatic speakers and electromagnetic induction (EMI) speakers. However, a disadvantage with electrostatic speakers is that they are dipole, and therefore require openings in both the front and back, and require a thin, soft film diaphragm that is too fragile for use in, for example, an aircraft cabin due to pressure changes during a flight. Electrostatic speakers are coherence speakers and are very directional—making them a poor choice for short distance sound coverage. Further, electrostatic speakers require high voltage—on the order of 2,000 volts—and require heavy metal core transformers. All of this is undesirable for use in applications such as an aircraft cabin. A disadvantage with EMI speakers is that they require a relatively heavy magnetic bar and a printed or wired coil diaphragm. The magnetic bar adds weight to the aircraft. Magnetic field radiation is prohibited for plane use, and the diaphragm, which also must work on dipole principle, is too fragile for use in environments such as an aircraft cabin, and is a coherence speaker—having a projection angle narrower than that of a cone speaker.

Accordingly, there is a need for a loudspeaker system that may take up less space than a conventional cone speaker, not require cutting a hole through a passenger compartment panel, and that is able to project sound over a wider area than current loudspeaker systems.

SUMMARY

In an embodiment, the disclosed flat panel loudspeaker system may include a panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core, the panel having a weakened area defined by at least one slot formed through the

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outer sheet, and an exciter attached to the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

In another embodiment, a vehicle may include a panel forming a cabin wall, the panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core, the panel having a weakened area defined by a plurality of slots formed through the outer sheet, and wherein the inner sheet is imperforate over the weakened area, and an exciter contacting the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

In yet another embodiment, a method of constructing a flat panel loudspeaker system for transmitting sound energy within a vehicle cabin defined by a panel, the panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core, may include forming a weakened area in the panel, the weakened area defined by at least one slot formed through the outer sheet, and wherein the inner sheet is imperforate over the weakened area, and attaching an exciter to the panel at the weakened area.

Other objects and advantages of the disclosed flat panel loudspeaker system will be apparent from the following description, the accompanying drawings and the appended claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of the disclosed flat panel loudspeaker system;

FIG. 2 is a plan view of the panel of the system of FIG. 1, showing the weakened area defined by at least one slot formed through the outer sheet of the panel;

FIG. 3 is a plan view of the panel of FIG. 2, shown with damping elements in the form of segments of tape covering portions of the slots;

FIG. 4 is a perspective view of the flat panel loudspeaker system of FIG. 1, in which the panel and exciter are in section;

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of the coil, coil former and lock pad of the flat panel loudspeaker system of FIG. 1;

FIGS. 6A and 6B are plan views of the lock pad, lock base and support bracket, in which the lock pad is shown in an unlocked and a locked position, respectively;

FIG. 6C is a detail in perspective showing an alternate engagement between the lock pad and lock base; and

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of an alternate design of the exciter housing.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

As shown in FIG. 1, a flat panel loudspeaker system, generally designated 10, may incorporate a panel 12 having a core 14, an inner sheet 16 coupled to an inner surface of the core 14, and an outer sheet 18 coupled to an outer surface of the core 14. As shown in FIGS. 2 and 3, the panel 12 may have a weakened area, generally designated 20, defined by at least one slot 22 formed through the outer sheet 18, thereby exposing the core 14. In other embodiments, the at least one slot 22 may be formed only partially through the outer sheet 18. As shown in FIG. 1, the loudspeaker system 10 may include an exciter, generally designated 24, attached to the panel 12 at the weakened area 20 and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy. In an embodiment, the inner sheet 16 may be imperforate over the weakened area 20; that is, there may be no holes, slots or cuts formed in the inner sheet opposite the weakened area 20.

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In an embodiment, the panel 12 may be a portion of a vehicle 26, such as an aircraft, a spacecraft, a land vehicle, a marine vehicle and a submarine vehicle. In still other embodiments, the panel 12 may be used as part of a wall or ceiling of a building or other static structure. In an embodiment, the panel 12 may be a ceiling panel, or interior wall enclosing a passenger compartment of an aircraft. In an embodiment, the inner sheet 16 and outer sheet 18 may be made of fiberglass, and in other embodiments may be made of aluminum, KEVLAR (a trademark of E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company of Wilmington, Del.), carbon fiber, composite or graphite. In an embodiment, the core 14 may be a honeycomb core or foam core, and may be made of fiberglass, aluminum or NOMEX (a trademark of E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company of Wilmington, Del.). The panel 12 may be on the order of 3/8 inches to 3/4 inches thick, or thicker if the size of the panel is expanded. In other embodiments, the panel 12 may be a sandwich panel having balsa wood/fiberglass resin skins coupled to a foam core 14. For domestic applications the sandwich panel may be made of cardboard paper skins with a paper honeycomb core, thin metal, plastic or thin wood skins with a paper honeycomb or foam core, and the like. Core material may include balsa wood configured as many thin beams that cross to form a support structure or matrix, or large, open-cell plastic structure.

As shown in FIGS. 2 and 3, the at least one slot 22 may take the form of a plurality of slots extending generally radially from a center 28 of the weakened area 20. In an embodiment, the plurality of slots 22 may be evenly spaced about the center 28. In an embodiment, the slots 22 may include at least two pairs of slots 30, 32 arranged to intersect at a pre-set angle. In an embodiment, the pre-set angle may be a right angle. In an embodiment, the slots 22 may include a plurality of slots 34 positioned in between the intersecting slots 30, 32. However, any suitable configuration of slots (more or less, longer or shorter) to achieve the required audio performance may be employed. In embodiments, the slots 22 may be rectilinear, curvilinear, or combinations of both.

As shown in FIG. 3, in an embodiment, the loudspeaker system 10 may include a damping element, generally designated 36. The damping element 36 may be attached to the outer sheet 18 at the weakened area 20. In an embodiment, the damping element 36 may include tape 38 covering less than the entirety of at least one slot 34. In an embodiment, the tape 38 may be formed in segments, and the segments may be spaced evenly about the weakened area 20. In embodiments, the tape segments 38 may be made of vinyl, such as electrician's tape, and in other embodiments, may be made of paper, such as masking tape. In yet another embodiment, the tape segments 38 may be an aluminum tape. In still other embodiments, other materials may be used. The tape segments 38 may be attached to the outer sheet 18 by a suitable adhesive.

As shown in FIGS. 1 and 4, the exciter 24 may include a voice coil assembly, generally designated 40, attached to the outer sheet 18 at the weakened area 20. In an embodiment, the voice coil assembly 40 may include a coil 42 configured to be energized by an electric current, and a lock pad 44. The lock pad 44 may include a coil former 46, as shown in FIG. 5. In embodiments, the coil 42 may be made of thin gauge copper wire, or other conductive wire such as aluminum. The lock pad 44 may be made of plastic, nylon or other suitable solid, lightweight material, and the coil former 46 that may include the voice coil assembly 40, may be mounted above the lock pad 44, and may be made of KAPTON (a trademark of E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company of Wilmington, Del.), plastic, nylon, stiff paper, or any suitable dielectric. The lock pad 44 may include a base 48 having radially projecting tabs 50. In an

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embodiment, the tabs 50 may be spaced evenly about the base 48. The coil former 46 may be cylindrical in shape and sized to slip over the outer surface of a cylindrical projection 52 of the lock pad 44 and secured to the cylindrical projection by a suitable adhesive. The cylindrical projection 52 and coil former 46 may be shaped to define an opening 54 centrally through the lock pad 44.

As shown in FIGS. 1, 4, and 6A and 6B, the exciter 24 may include a lock base 56 mounted on and contacting the outer sheet 18 of the panel 12, and configured to releasably engage the lock pad 44. The lock base 56 may include an annular base 58 that contacts the outer sheet 18 and that defines an opening 60 that may be coaxial with the opening 54 formed by the lock pad 44. The base 48 of the lock pad 44 may be shaped to align with the annular base 58 of the lock base 56 in an axial direction with respect to the openings 54, 60. The lock base 56 may include an outer flange 62 having slots 64 shaped to receive the tabs 50 of the lock pad 44. The slots 64 may include pockets 66 for securing the tabs 50 in a releasable friction fit, bayonet connection.

As shown best in FIGS. 6A and 6B, the lock pad 44 may be placed on the lock base 56 so that the tabs 50 may be centered in the slots 64. The lock pad 44 may then be rotated clockwise relative to the lock base 56, as shown in FIG. 6B, so that the tabs 50 engage the pockets 66 of the slots 64, thus securing the lock pad to the lock base. Thereafter, the lock pad 44 may be rotated in a counter-clockwise direction from the orientation in FIG. 6B to the orientation in FIG. 6A to release the engagement between the lock pad and the lock base 56.

As shown in FIG. 6C, in an embodiment, the lock pad 44' may include one or more tabs 50' (only one of which is shown) that may have a raised locking detent 51 that is shaped and positioned on an upper surface of the tab to engage a correspondingly shaped catch, which in the embodiment shown is a hole 57 formed in the slot 64' of the lock base 56'. Other shapes of locking detent 51' may be employed without departing from the scope of the disclosed system 10. The use of a locking detent 51 and hole 57 may prevent inadvertent disengagement of the lock pad 44' from the lock base 56'.

As shown in FIGS. 1 and 4, the exciter 24 may include an exciter housing 68 shaped to receive a magnet 70, which in an embodiment may be a permanent magnet. The magnet 70 may be cylindrical in shape and concentric with the coil 42. The magnet 70 may extend from the exciter housing inside the coil former 46 to form a magnetic gap with the coil 42. The exciter housing 68 may be made of metal, such as steel, which may be part of the magnetic circuitry to redirect the magnetic field of the magnet 70 to the gap between the magnet and coil 42 to reduce flux leakage.

The exciter 24 also may include a suspension spring 72 that may be attached at an inner periphery to the coil former 46, and at an outer periphery to an annular flange 86 of the exciter housing 68. In embodiments, the attachment may be by a suitable adhesive. The suspension spring 72 may be made of a fabric, such as KEVLAR (a trademark of E.I. Du Pont de Nemours and Company). Thus, the suspension spring 72 may support the coil 42 and lock pad 44 and keep them centered relative to the exciter housing 68 and magnet 70.

An exciter support bracket 76 may be connected to the exciter housing 68, and include an annular base 80 that may be mounted on the outer sheet 18 of the panel 12. The base 80 may be attached to the outer sheet 18 by a suitable adhesive, or by mechanical means, such as screws, rivets or fasteners. The support bracket 76 may include resilient arms 82 projecting upwardly from the base 80 and spaced evenly about the periphery of the base. The arms 82 may be shaped to form arcuate slots 84 that may be biased radially inwardly to releas-

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ably receive the outer annular flange **86** of the exciter housing **68**. As shown in FIG. 1, the flange **86** of the housing **68** may include tabs **88** to which a terminal **90** may be attached. Terminal **90** may serve as leads for the wires **92** (only one of which is shown) of the coil **42**. The tabs **88**, in conjunction with terminal **90**, may be attached to audio equipment (not shown), such as an amplifier, to receive audio signals to drive the exciter **24**.

In an embodiment shown in FIG. 7, the exciter support bracket **76** may include a base **80** having cutouts **81** that may be shaped and positioned to avoid contact with the plurality of slots **22** formed in the outer sheet **18** of the panel **12**. The cutouts **81** may reduce or prevent the exciter bracket **76** from interfering from the vibration of the panel **12**. The arms **82** may include openings **83** that may reduce the spring value of the arms. In embodiments, the arms **82** may taper in thickness, increasing in thickness from the slots **84** to the base **80**. This tapering also may reduce the spring value of the arms **80** of the exciter housing **76**.

In operation, a method of constructing a flat panel loudspeaker system for transmitting sound energy within a vehicle cabin defined by the panel **12** may include forming the weakened area **20** (FIGS. 2 and 3) in the outer sheet **18** of the panel **12**, in which the weakened area is defined by at least one slot **22** formed in the outer sheet. The slots **22** may be linear or curved in shape and formed by cutting, as by laser or router cutting, or abrading the material of the outer sheet **18**. In other embodiments, the outer sheet **18** may be formed or cast with the slots **22** already present. The inner sheet **16** of the panel **12** (FIG. 1) may be formed to be imperforate over the weakened area **20**.

The exciter **24** (FIGS. 1 and 4), may be attached to the panel **12** at the weakened area **20**. In an embodiment, the annular base **58** of the lock base **56** may be attached to the panel **12** by an adhesive or other means, and in an embodiment, may be positioned so that it may be concentric with the center **28** (FIGS. 2 and 3) of the weakened area **20**. The exciter support bracket **76** may be attached to the outer sheet **18** either before or after attaching the lock base **56** to the panel **12**. In an embodiment, the exciter bracket **76** may be attached to the outer sheet **18** so that it may be centered relative to the center **28** of the weakened area **20**, then the exciter housing **68**, lock pad **44** and lock base **56** pressed downwardly (in FIG. 4) toward the sheet until the base **58** contacts the outer sheet and the flange **86** of the exciter housing engages and is retained in the slots **84** of the arms **82**.

In embodiments, the lock base **56** may be attached to the panel **12** by itself, or as a unit along with the lock pad **44** and exciter housing **68**. If the former, the lock pad **44** may thereafter be attached to the lock base **56** as shown in FIGS. 6A and 6B. The leads **88**, **90** (FIG. 1) may be connected to a sound amplifier (not shown) and the sound amplifier provides a signal to the coil **42** of the exciter **24**. The signal energizes the coil **42**, and movement of the voice coil **40** causes the weakened area **20** to deflect. Thus, the exciter **24** vibrates the panel **12** at the weakened area **20** to generate sound energy within the vehicle cabin **26**.

In an embodiment, the signal (which may be a sine wave) may be in the form of an electric current and voltage that energizes the coil **42**, causing the coil to move in a direction perpendicular to the panel **12**. This movement may be transmitted by the lock pad **44** to the lock base **56**, and from the lock base directly to the outer sheet **18** of the panel **12**, causing the panel **12** to flex and thus vibrate at the weakened area **20**. In an embodiment, the signals may be representative of a human voice, so that the vibration of the panel **12** transmits sound energy to reproduce a human voice through the panel

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12 and to the interior of the vehicle **26**. Referring to FIG. 3, the quality of the sound produced by the system **10** may be altered and/or enhanced as needed by the addition of the damping element **36**.

An advantage of the flat panel loudspeaker system **10** is that it may incorporate a panel **12** that is a current production base panel without need to make a specific custom layout formulation to act as the diaphragm of a speaker to transmit sound energy, including sound replicating a human voice, to the interior of a cabin defined by the panel. In embodiments, the pattern of slots **22** may be any suitable cut pattern that enables the panel **12** to vibrate a few nano-inches to produce audible sound waves. In an exemplary embodiment, the cut pattern may be a starburst pattern with intersecting cuts at the center **28** of the starburst. In embodiments, the cuts may be about 0.025 inches wide and may be formed by computer routing.

While the form of apparatus herein described constitutes a preferred embodiment of the disclosed flat panel loudspeaker system, it is to be understood that the flat panel loudspeaker system is not limited to this precise form of apparatus, and that changes may be made therein without departing from the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A flat panel loudspeaker system comprising:

a panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core;

the panel having at least one slot through the outer sheet, thereby exposing the core and forming a weakened area of the panel;

the inner sheet being imperforate over the weakened area; and

an exciter mounted on and contacting the outer sheet of the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

2. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 1, wherein the at least one slot includes a plurality of slots extending generally radially from a center of the weakened area.

3. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 2, wherein the plurality of slots are evenly spaced about the center.

4. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 3, wherein the plurality of slots includes at least two pairs of slots arranged to intersect at pre-set angles.

5. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 4, wherein the plurality of slots includes a plurality of slots positioned in between the at least two pairs of slots.

6. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 1, further comprising a damping element.

7. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 6, wherein the damping element is attached to the outer sheet at the weakened area.

8. A flat panel loudspeaker system comprising:

a panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core;

the panel having a weakened area defined by at least one slot formed through the outer sheet;

a damping element attached to the outer sheet at the weakened area, the damping element including tape covering less than an entirety of the at least one slot; and

an exciter attached to the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

9. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 1, wherein the exciter includes a voice coil attached to the outer sheet at the weakened area, whereby energizing the voice coil causes the weakened area to deflect.

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10. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 9, wherein the voice coil includes a coil configured to be energized by an electric voltage and current; and a lock pad.

11. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 10, wherein the lock pad includes a coil former; and the coil is wound about the coil former.

12. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 11, wherein the exciter includes a lock base mounted on and contacting the outer sheet of the panel and configured to releasably engage the lock pad.

13. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 12, wherein the exciter includes an exciter housing having a magnet shaped to form a magnetic gap with the coil; a suspension spring attached to the coil former and exciter housing; and an exciter support bracket connected to the exciter housing and attached to the panel.

14. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 1, wherein the panel is part of an interior wall of a vehicle.

15. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 14, wherein the vehicle is selected from an aircraft, a spacecraft, a land vehicle, a marine vehicle, and a submarine vehicle.

16. A panel forming a cabin wall in a vehicle comprising: of the vehicle the panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core;

the panel having a plurality of slots formed through the outer sheet, thereby exposing the core and forming a weakened area of the panel;

the inner sheet is imperforate over the weakened area; and an exciter mounted on and contacting the outer sheet of the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel to generate sound energy.

17. The panel of claim 16, wherein the vehicle is selected from an aircraft, a spacecraft, a land vehicle, a marine vehicle, and a submarine vehicle; and wherein the sound energy replicates a human voice.

18. A method of constructing a flat panel loudspeaker system for transmitting sound energy within a vehicle cabin defined by a panel, the panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core, the method comprising:

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forming a slot through the outer sheet, thereby exposing the core and forming a weakened area in the panel, and wherein the inner sheet is imperforate over the weakened area; and

mounting an exciter on the panel at the weakened area such that the exciter contacts the outer sheet at the weakened area.

19. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 8, wherein the tape is formed in segments, and the segments are spaced evenly about the weakened area.

20. A flat panel loudspeaker system comprising:

a panel having a core, an inner sheet coupled to an inner surface of the core and an outer sheet coupled to an outer surface of the core;

the panel having at least one slot in the outer sheet forming a weakened area of the panel; and

an exciter mounted on and attached to the panel at the weakened area and configured to vibrate the panel at the weakened area to generate sound energy, the exciter including

a lock base mounted on and contacting the outer sheet of the panel at the weakened area, the lock base including an annular base that contacts the outer sheet and defines an opening,

a lock pad attached to the lock base, the lock pad including a coil and forming an opening that is coaxial with the opening in the lock base,

an exciter housing including a magnet adjacent the coil, and

an exciter housing support bracket attached to the exciter housing and to the outer sheet of the panel.

21. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 20, wherein at least one of the lock pad is releasably attached to the lock base, and the exciter housing support bracket is releasably attached to the exciter housing.

22. The flat panel loudspeaker system of claim 21, wherein the lock pad is releasably attached to the lock base, and the exciter housing support bracket is releasably attached to the exciter housing.

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